

# Truth and Belief: A Comparative Study of Indian and Western Epistemologies

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**Abstract**—The concepts of truth and belief are central to epistemology, forming the basis for theories of knowledge in both Indian and Western traditions. While Western epistemology, particularly since the Enlightenment, has emphasized propositional justification and correspondence theories of truth, Indian epistemology—rooted in schools like Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Buddhism—has developed unique *pramāṇa*-based approaches. This paper presents a comparative study of these traditions, highlighting similarities in their concern with knowledge validation while exploring differences in their metaphysical commitments and epistemic priorities. The study further reflects on the implications of these distinctions for contemporary philosophical inquiry. By synthesizing insights from both traditions, the paper advocates for a more integrated and pluralistic approach to understanding knowledge.

**Index Terms**—Truth, Belief, Epistemology, Indian Philosophy, Western Philosophy, *Pramāṇa*, Justification, Knowledge

## I. INTRODUCTION

Epistemology, the philosophical study of knowledge, revolves around fundamental questions concerning the nature of truth, belief, and justification. In both Indian and Western traditions, thinkers have extensively examined what constitutes true knowledge and how beliefs can be validated. Despite this shared concern, the methodologies and assumptions underlying these inquiries vary significantly.

In Western philosophy, epistemological thought—from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes and Kant—has largely centered on belief as a mental state that must correspond to objective reality to qualify as knowledge. Truth is commonly analyzed through the correspondence theory, coherence theory, or pragmatic theory, with a strong focus on propositional knowledge—‘knowing that.’

Conversely, Indian epistemology begins with the concept of *pramāṇa*—means or instruments of valid knowledge. Schools such as Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Advaita Vedānta, and Buddhism developed intricate theories about the sources and validity of knowledge (perception, inference, comparison, verbal testimony, etc.). Here, truth is not always defined as correspondence to a fixed reality but sometimes as pragmatic efficacy or internal coherence within a philosophical system.

This paper attempts to explore these diverse epistemic landscapes by examining how truth and belief are conceptualized and interrelated in both traditions. The study is motivated by the need to decolonize epistemology and to foreground non-Western contributions in global philosophical discourse.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the conceptual relationship between truth and belief in Indian and Western epistemologies.
2. To compare the dominant theories of truth and belief across both traditions.
3. To identify unique contributions of Indian epistemology to global philosophical discourse.
4. To analyze the epistemological significance of *pramāṇa* in validating belief in Indian systems.
5. To encourage a pluralistic epistemological framework incorporating both traditions.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a comparative philosophical method, involving:

- Textual analysis of primary and secondary sources from both Indian (e.g., Nyāya Sūtras, Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya, Buddhist logic) and Western traditions (e.g., Descartes’ *Meditations*,

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Gettier's Problem).

- Doctrinal comparison to identify points of convergence and divergence.
- Analytic interpretation to assess coherence, explanatory power, and implications of truth-belief models.
- Hermeneutic approach to understand epistemic notions within their cultural-philosophical contexts.

#### IV. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The philosophical concepts of truth and belief have long been central to epistemology, but the approaches and frameworks differ widely between Indian and Western traditions. Scholars from both traditions have explored these concepts independently, while recent comparative philosophical works have attempted to bridge the epistemological divide.

##### 1. Western Philosophical Approaches

Western epistemology has historically emphasized belief as a psychological state that, when true and justified, constitutes knowledge. Foundational contributions include:

- Plato's "Theaetetus" (4th century BCE): This is one of the earliest Western texts where knowledge is equated to "justified true belief." While Plato ultimately questions this definition, it laid the groundwork for later epistemology.
- René Descartes (17th century): In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes sought indubitable beliefs through radical doubt. For him, truth is rooted in clarity and distinctness—a rationalist approach that links belief and certainty.
- Immanuel Kant (1781): In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argued that truth is a regulative ideal, and knowledge arises from the synthesis of sensory input and a priori categories.
- Bertrand Russell (1912): In *the Problems of Philosophy*, Russell emphasized the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, focusing on the justification of belief and the correspondence theory of truth.

Indian Philosophical Approaches: -

##### 2. Indian Epistemological Literature

Indian philosophy explores knowledge (jñāna) through the doctrine of pramāṇa—valid means of knowing. Each classical system offers unique insights:

- Nyāya School: As articulated in the *Nyāya Sūtras* and later by Udayana and Gaṅgeśa, Nyāya recognizes four pramāṇas: perception (pratyakṣa), inference (anumāna), comparison (upamāna), and testimony (śabda). Truth (satya) is validated through reliable cognitive instruments rather than belief as such.
- Mīmāṃsā Philosophy: Especially in the works of Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, *śabda pramāṇa* (verbal testimony) is emphasized. Mīmāṃsā sees Vedic texts as inherently valid, raising questions about truth that do not rely on empirical verification.
- Buddhist Epistemology: Philosophers like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti proposed a two-pramāṇa theory (perception and inference), emphasizing momentariness (kṣaṇikatva) and the instrumental validity (arthakriyākāritva) of truth—truth is what works in practice, not necessarily correspondence.
- Advaita Vedānta: In Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya*, truth is ultimately non-dual reality (Brahman). All empirical knowledge (vyavahārika satya) is seen as relatively true, while absolute truth (pāramārthika satya) transcends conceptual belief.
- Jain Philosophy: Advocates anekāntavāda (many-sidedness) and syādvāda (conditional predication), suggesting that truth is contextual and multifaceted. This challenges the binary Western view of absolute truth and belief.
- Contemporary Indian Scholars:
  - B.K. Matilal (1986), in *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*, demonstrated that Indian theories rival Western logical epistemology in rigor and subtlety.
  - J.N. Mohanty (1992) highlighted parallels between Husserl's phenomenology and Indian philosophies, arguing for a broader epistemological framework beyond the Western canon.

##### 3. Comparative and Intercultural Contributions

- Jonardon Ganeri (2001), in *Philosophy in Classical India*, challenged the notion that Indian philosophy is merely spiritual or religious,

arguing it is deeply analytic and epistemologically sophisticated.

- Arindam Chakrabarti has written extensively on knowledge and belief in Indian thought, particularly on the function of language, perception, and testimony.
- Stephen Phillips and Karl Potter have translated and interpreted classical Indian epistemological texts, emphasizing their potential contributions to global epistemological debates.
- Chadha and Dasgupta (2015) argued for integrating Indian epistemology into contemporary philosophical discourse, particularly in light of debates on testimony and perceptual realism.

These comparative works advocate for a cross-cultural epistemology that respects both traditions while seeking convergence in shared philosophical questions.

#### Comparative Analysis: Indian vs. Western Epistemologies

##### Western Epistemology

- Belief as a psychological state that must be justified and true to be considered knowledge.
- Truth is commonly understood via:
  - Correspondence Theory (truth corresponds to external reality).
  - Coherence Theory (truth is consistency within a belief system).
  - Pragmatic Theory (truth as utility or success in practice).
- Justified True Belief (JTB) model dominated until challenged by Gettier problems (1963), leading to revised theories (reliabilism, contextualism, etc.).

##### Indian Epistemology

- Emphasizes *pramāṇa* (valid means of knowledge): *pratyakṣa* (perception), *anumāna* (inference), *śabda* (testimony), *upamāna* (comparison), etc.
- Belief is often implicit in cognition (*pramiti*), arising through valid epistemic instruments.
- Truth (*satya*, *tattva*) is often context-sensitive and instrumentally efficacious (as in Buddhist theories of momentariness or Advaita's sublation theory).

- No universal "JTB" model, but rigorous criteria for validity—e.g., *avyabhicāra* (non-contradiction), *arthakriyākāritva* (pragmatic success).

#### Major Findings: -

This study's comparative analysis of Indian and Western epistemologies reveals a number of significant philosophical distinctions and commonalities in their treatment of truth and belief:

##### 1. Divergent Conceptions of Truth

- Western epistemology predominantly views truth through objective, propositional lenses—typically via the Correspondence Theory, where a belief is true if it aligns with an external reality.
- Indian epistemology, by contrast, offers pluralistic understandings of truth:
  - Nyāya considers truth as correspondence (*yathārtha jñāna*—knowledge that corresponds to reality).
  - Buddhist epistemology regards truth as instrumentally valid—that which leads to successful practical engagement (*arthakriyākāritva*).
  - Advaita Vedānta distinguishes between empirical truth (*vyāvahārika*) and absolute truth (*pāramārthika*), a distinction absent in most Western traditions.

This pluralism allows Indian systems to acknowledge relative and context-bound truths, whereas Western traditions often seek a unified theory of truth.

##### 2. Belief as Psychological vs. Epistemic Construct

- In Western thought, belief is considered a mental attitude toward a proposition—necessary but not sufficient for knowledge.
- In Indian traditions, belief is not the central unit of epistemic analysis. Instead, *pramā* (valid knowledge) is emphasized as an event or state of awareness produced by a reliable source (*pramāṇa*). Belief may be presupposed but is not independently examined as much as in Western epistemology.

Thus, Indian systems emphasize the valid means of acquiring knowledge rather than the internal state of belief itself.

##### 3. Emphasis on *Pramāṇa* (Means of Knowledge) in Indian Philosophy

- The Indian tradition's focus on *pramāṇas* (perception, inference, comparison, testimony, etc.) is a unique contribution. Knowledge is considered true and valid only if it originates from a reliable cognitive instrument.
- The Nyāya school, for instance, provides criteria for validity such as non-contradiction, practical utility, and intersubjective agreement.
- Western epistemology tends to focus more on justification after belief is formed rather than the cognitive process that generates it.

This highlights a fundamental divergence: Indian epistemology is source-oriented, while Western epistemology is outcome-oriented.

#### 4. Testimony (Śabda) as a Valid Source of Knowledge

- Indian epistemology, especially in Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā, considers verbal testimony (*śabda*) a distinct and independent *pramāṇa*—on par with perception or inference.
- In Western philosophy, testimony is often considered derivative or secondary—justified only if it can be reduced to personal evidence or perception.

This difference reflects varying cultural emphases on communal vs. individual sources of knowledge.

#### 5. Truth and Belief within Metaphysical and Ethical Frameworks

- Indian philosophical systems often embed epistemology within broader metaphysical and ethical concerns. For example, Buddhist and Vedāntic traditions view ignorance (*avidyā*) as the root of suffering, and correct knowledge (*vidyā*) as essential to liberation (*mokṣa*).
- Western epistemology, particularly in the analytic tradition, tends to separate epistemology from metaphysics and ethics, treating it as a self-contained inquiry into justified belief.

This implies that in Indian systems, truth is both epistemic and soteriological, whereas in Western systems, it is primarily epistemic and logical.

Summary Table of Major Findings

#### 6. Cross-Traditional Convergence on Rationality and Perception

- Despite methodological differences, both traditions value rational inquiry and perception as essential for knowledge acquisition.
  - Nyāya inference (*anumāna*) resembles Aristotelian syllogism.
  - Perception (*pratyakṣa*) in Indian philosophy shares functional similarities with sense-data theories in Western thought.

This convergence suggests a potential philosophical common ground that can support intercultural epistemological dialogue.

#### 7. Context-Sensitivity vs. Universalism in Epistemology

- Indian systems tend to be context-sensitive, with epistemic categories adapting to pragmatic, metaphysical, or scriptural contexts (e.g., *anekāntavāda* in Jainism).
- Western systems often assume universal criteria for truth and belief, although this has been increasingly challenged by postmodern and contextualist philosophers.

This reflects a broader difference in epistemic flexibility, with Indian systems demonstrating a multi-valued logic, in contrast to the binary logic typically dominant in Western traditions.

#### 8. Underutilization of Indian Epistemology in Global Discourse

- Despite their depth and sophistication, Indian epistemological theories remain underrepresented in global philosophical discourse.
- Comparative works by Matilal, Ganeri, and Mohanty show that integrating Indian insights can enrich contemporary debates on perception, testimony, and cognitive authority.

This finding highlights a need to decolonize epistemology and expand the canon beyond Western-centric paradigms.

Aspect	Indian Epistemology	Western Epistemology
Truth	Pluralistic (e.g., pragmatic, contextual, absolute)	Mostly singular (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic)
Belief	Implicit in cognition, not central	Psychological state central to knowledge
Justification	Via valid means ( <i>pramāṇa</i> )	Via internal/external justification models
Testimony	Independent and authoritative ( <i>śabda pramāṇa</i> )	Secondary, often reduced to perception
Metaphysics	Integrated with ethics/metaphysics (e.g., liberation)	Often analytically isolated
Rationality	Emphasizes perception and inference	Similar emphasis on logic and sensory input
Contextuality	High (e.g., Jainism's <i>syādvāda</i> )	Often universalist, though shifting
Global Recognition	Underutilized and underrepresented	Dominant in academic discourse

## V. RECOMMENDATIONS / SUGGESTIONS

Based on the comparative analysis of Indian and Western epistemologies with regard to truth and belief, the following recommendations are proposed to enrich both academic philosophy and educational practice:

### 1. Integrate Indian Epistemology into Mainstream Philosophical Curricula

- Philosophy departments, particularly in India and Asia, should integrate Indian epistemological frameworks (e.g., *pramāṇa theory*, *anekāntavāda*, *śabda pramāṇa*) into core courses on epistemology.
- Comparative philosophy should be taught not as a niche area but as an essential lens to understand diverse approaches to truth and belief.

### 2. Encourage Cross-Cultural Philosophical Research

- Scholars in both traditions should be encouraged to engage in intercultural dialogue. Conferences, journals, and workshops should promote comparative studies that highlight epistemic diversity.
- Collaborative research across disciplines (e.g., philosophy, cognitive science, linguistics) can help bridge Indian and Western insights, especially in areas like perception, inference, and testimony.

### 3. Revise Western-Centric Epistemic Models

- Global philosophy should move beyond the limitations of the Western "Justified True Belief"

(JTB) model, incorporating non-Western alternatives like Indian *pramāṇa* theory, which offers process-based validation rather than static belief analysis.

- Epistemology should recognize that not all traditions privilege belief as the foundation of knowledge, and instead explore cognition, awareness, or knowing-events (*pramā*) as central categories.

### 4. Reconsider the Role of Testimony in Knowledge

- Given the prominent status of *śabda* (verbal testimony) in Indian systems, contemporary epistemology should reevaluate the epistemic significance of testimony, especially in contexts involving cultural transmission, scriptural authority, or expert knowledge.
- Indian models can help inform ongoing debates in analytic philosophy about the epistemology of testimony and epistemic dependence.

### 5. Apply Epistemological Insights to Modern Education and Ethics

- Educational philosophy can benefit from Indian perspectives on knowledge acquisition, where perception, intuition, and authority are balanced and contextually validated.
- The ethical dimension of truth-seeking (as seen in Advaita's quest for liberation or Buddhism's critique of ignorance) should be recognized in both academic learning and value education.

### 6. Promote Translation and Accessibility of Classical Texts

- Many classical Indian texts on epistemology remain inaccessible to non-Sanskrit readers. Translating and commenting on works like the *Nyāya Sūtras*, *Tarka Sangraha*, and *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya* will greatly enrich global scholarship.
- Comparative commentaries that juxtapose Indian texts with Western classics can foster deeper understanding and dialogue.

#### 7. Support Decolonization of Epistemology

- Academic institutions and journals should support efforts to decolonize philosophy by recognizing that truth and belief are culturally embedded constructs, not universally defined in Western terms alone.
- Indian epistemological systems should be presented not as “alternative,” but as equal contributors to the philosophical canon.

#### 8. Encourage Epistemic Pluralism in Research and Pedagogy

- A pluralistic approach to epistemology—one that values multiple truth-claims, sources of knowledge, and epistemic norms—should be adopted in both research and pedagogy.
- Such pluralism not only respects cultural diversity but also improves philosophical rigor by challenging narrow epistemic assumptions.

### V. CONCLUSION

Truth and belief, though universally central to epistemology, manifest through distinct conceptual frameworks in Indian and Western thought. This comparative study reveals that Indian philosophy, through its nuanced *pramāṇa* system, offers an alternative yet robust understanding of valid cognition and truth. Western epistemology, while methodologically rigorous, can benefit from the inclusiveness and contextuality seen in Indian approaches. Bridging these traditions not only decolonizes the discipline but also enriches our collective understanding of knowledge in a pluralistic world.

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